

LIFELONG LEARNING FOR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS!

And Religious Education Leaders Dedication

We may only talk about it once or twice a year in a Sunday Service, but education is one of the highest priorities for most Unitarian Universalists. We try to accept those who might only have a bachelor's degree or less, but we really think education is important, for everyone, and at all levels. We often advocate and participate in tutoring programs, offer scholarships to the best and brightest, and encourage our children and youth to think about higher education almost from nursery school onward! When some of our children are not engaged, excited and successful in school, we worry and wonder what we have done wrong! If there are any sins among UUs, not using our brains must be one of the worst! Of course many other religious communities value education, with many of the colleges and universities around the country having been started by Unitarians, Universalists, Methodists, Catholics, Lutherans or other Christian groups. Unitarians can claim Harvard, Congregationalists, Princeton, and Methodists, Northwestern and Southern Methodist, to name just a few prominent institutions.

Even beyond the degrees we may earn, though, most of us would claim lifelong learning as part of our way of life. We take and teach classes in programs like the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of Pacific and the Stockton Institute for Continued Learning at Delta College. We participate in various classes offered here at 1st UU and engage in Book Clubs and other learning settings. We read, we listen to NPR, we watch the History Channel and PBS, and we enjoy learning new things and reminding ourselves of things we may have forgotten.

We also expect sermons and programs to be rational, well supported factually and interesting! Prolonged evangelical harangues are not well received by Unitarian Universalists. We are more interested in hearing about programs that will make life better or help people. We are interested in learning about other cultures and other religions, and we expect our children's and youth programs to introduce our children to the beliefs and practices of other traditions,

cultures, and religions while also being fun for the kids. These high expectations for Religious Education lead us to employ accomplished individuals who have training, skills and experience so that they have much to offer our children and youth. But our Religious Education program is small and our workers only part-time, so we also need volunteers to help out. We each have something to offer even if it is just to share our experiences, hobbies, or travels! There are always opportunities to help out in religious education at one or several levels!

Lifelong learning is a habit best acquired during our early years and it is certainly founded in our level of curiosity, our desire to explore and discover all we can about ourselves, others, and the world and universe in which we live. Some traditions, families, and even schools block exploration and discovery in favor of views of people and the universe which are shared by the group in which the individual is being raised, often on religious grounds. Such limitations on natural curiosity do not as often happen among Unitarian Universalists, though we too can become set in our ways and beliefs. The freedom to explore, discover, and learn is extremely important to most UUs and we try to offer such opportunities in our religious education programs for every age level.

Too often in our modern world, there are individuals who are ready to tell anyone what to believe, experts who often tell lies or fabricate reality for their own nefarious purposes. In religious and political settings there have always been charlatans and snake-oil salesmen ready to sell the public a bill of goods for their own gain. Even in our modern world vast numbers of people would rather believe in slick preachers and teachers than to even do their own internet fact-checking. Why bother checking reality? Why bother believing scientists about Global Warming or Climate Change? Why not just accept that the earth is only 6,000 years old, or flat or that we never went to the moon? Even with all the good information available at the press of a few keys, almost half of the population is ready to believe things that can be readily shown to be untrue.

Some of the contortions of reality required to sustain certain fundamentalist beliefs about the age of the world are really comical. Imagine if you will, T-Rexes living with early people, all the Dinosaurs & Unicorns missing the Ark!

Ignore geology, rage against evolutionary science, ignore the almost universal consensus of climate scientists, and read the Bible as if it were literal history! It takes work to ignore so much science and history. Fortunately most Christians and others are more open-minded, but really!!

For us Unitarian Universalists, the religious strands within Christianity and other religions are certainly another area for exploration and discovery. Even the question of why people would choose to believe many of the widely held beliefs and doctrines of different groups is an interesting course of study. It has been helpful for many of us to discover that there have also always been far more rational and inclusive strands of each tradition. As we discover more about our own history, it is inspiring to see where our religious forebears bucked the trends that became dominant so as to be named heretics.

Unitarian Universalism at its core is more a framework for discovering inspiring truths than for promulgating any particular belief. With tolerance and acceptance as keys to our practices, it is easy to understand that we do not have a unified belief pattern or creed in regard to God or the absence thereof. Our most important beliefs are in the process by which we live out such values as acceptance with a commitment to justice with compassion and a hope of a unified world community which is ecologically aware. Our 7 Principles express that values framework, while our 6 Sources provide historical reference to the main traditions which have helped to form and inform our movement.

Our Principles and Sources set the stage for lifelong learning, perpetual seeking for truth and wisdom. We are a perpetually seeking, ever journeying people. We may offer few final answers other than that change continues to inspire new responses to the needs of each new day. We do generally maintain a positive attitude to life even faced with difficult challenges. And of course we are reticent to accept anyone else's answers to the questions that intrigue and inspire us! It does make each new day more interesting!

I really can't imagine being so caught up in any tradition philosophical or religious that I would just accept doctrine, dogma, or creeds as true. Unitarian Universalists are such wonderfully independent thinkers that even many half-baked solutions to local or world problems are at least more creative!

It is also true that UUs tend to create wheels more often and more repetitively than many other groups, but sometimes you do get a better wheel when you create it yourself! And sometimes you just have to do the work to really own what you are doing. There are times when a more complete study of history could save some efforts, but even similar circumstances do not always need the same answers! Unitarian and Universalist statements about beliefs have changed many times throughout history, and the way UU congregations today do things is different in some significant ways from how they functioned in the past. The challenge is in figuring out what to save and what to change to meet the needs of the times.

That effort to learn how best to address the needs of this era is what our strategic planning group is all about. We hope to learn about the needs of our members, explore the needs of the larger community we serve and propose changes in how we operate in order to better meet the needs of all. I expect that this will be an ongoing process in the life of the congregation which will help to give direction to the volunteer leadership, minister, and staff in years to come. This is another expression of our commitment to lifelong learning as a congregation! Through this effort we will continue learning about the needs of members and friends and the larger community!

The other part of the learning process is insuring that there are committed leaders, teachers, rabbis, gurus, and masters who can help learners to continue learning. Rosalie and Mikayla recently attended an OWL training to equip them to lead sessions of OWL for Jr. and Sr. High Schoolers. OWL is Our Whole Lives, a curriculum family with holistic sexuality classes for all ages. Other members of the congregation have been trained previously and hopefully more will be trained in other age levels in the future so that we will be able to regularly offer these OWL classes.

In some other UU congregations, there are Buddhist Masters and Gurus who help to lead specific learning opportunities. We rely mostly on volunteers, but wouldn't it be wonderful to be able to offer Buddhist, Jewish, and Christian groups and perhaps regular Meditation and Dream Groups as well as various study groups on a regular basis?

As individuals we are mostly committed to lifelong learning, but wouldn't it be wonderful to be able to offer more such opportunities here? We are also busy people, committed to many efforts, engaged in many community oriented groups! We do need to choose where we give our time, energy, and financial support, and such choices change periodically depending on our own needs and the needs of the groups in which we are engaged. I appreciate the commitment that each of you make to this congregation and hope that it is offering you what you are seeking!

This church year now just begun is full of promise, but also dependent on the efforts of our staff and especially our loyal volunteers. There will be many opportunities for learning and for service during this year and I hope that you will all fully partake of what we offer as well as helping to shape what we offer by your comments and suggestions! Even though we can trace our history back to Jesus and perhaps beyond, we continue to learn and grow and change as a movement and as a congregation.

This sermon especially is an invitation to engage in the learning process by sharing your thoughts, hopes, and dreams for what we might offer, what we might do as a congregation? Every sermon in a UU congregation is an invitation to continued dialogue, but what would you like to offer to the learning process today?

Thank You for sharing your thoughts!

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!+